Beautiful William

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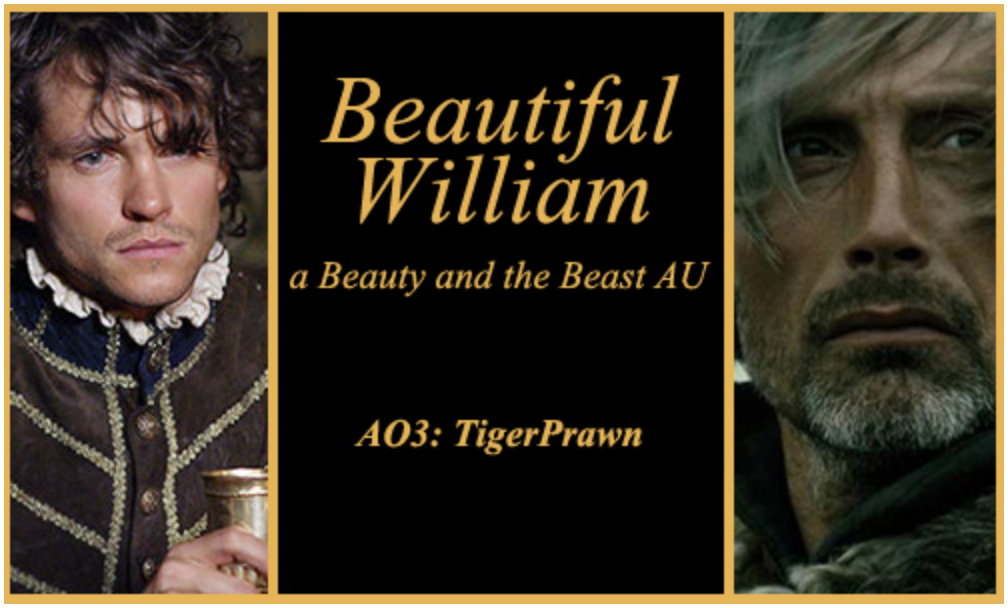
Beautiful William

by TigerPrawn

Summary

Hannigram/Beauty and the Beast AU. Inspired by TaeAelin's A Long Way from Home - Spacedogs/Little Mermaid AU

Loosely follows the plot of Disney's Beauty and the Beast, but considerably darker! Will is beautiful but rude (of course), Hannibal is cursed to be a Beast because he's a cannibal (of course), Mason is Gaston and things are not going to go well...



- Inspired by A Long Way from Home by TaeAelin

Chapter 1

The fire burning in the grate was the only light in the hunting lodge, casting an eerie shadow across the deceased trophies. At one end of the lodge hung high was the skull of a horse that Mason had inherited from his father. But pride of place was the stuffed hog's head above the fireplace that was now lit by the fire below, giving it the menacing look of something truly demonic. With the exception of these two items in the main, the hunting lodge was crowded with the antlers of the deer Mason, and his longtime manservant Hobbs, had been hunting since boyhood.

Mason sometimes felt that he was beyond this small provincial town of Loup Piège, he complained of it often to Hobbs. But in truth he knew he would not leave this place where he was the man to whom all turned. Here he was, as his father might have said, a big fish in a small pond, and he wasn't above acknowledging that, even if never aloud. It was something he enjoyed exploiting daily. Wealth and position were everything in a town such as this.

There was only one who did not turn to him, one person in the town who did not acknowledge his status - the beautiful William Graham. Will had moved recently to the town and all that was known of him was that his family was deceased and he made his living by mending machinery - such a modern profession. Mason had first glimpsed this young man that had all the town talking, when he had fixed the steam engine used at the mine on the outskirts of the town. Mason had been hunting at the time and even through the smudge of dirt across the young man's face, Mason had seen the appeal and understood immediately the fascination of the town the seemed to never cease in it's gossip of the reclusive and strange beauty.

He watched the fire as he sat in the oversized leather chair, fidgeting with the hunting knife he held in his right hand. It was growing low and he knew to expect Hobbs with more wood from the stores, though he had not anticipated the noise. The oaf returned, tripping over himself in the semi-darkness.

"Must I have no peace whilst I think?!" Mason bellowed, the usual edge of slight madness clear in his voice.

"Sorry Mason." Hobbs cowered as he stacked the wood and then added a log to the fire. "You have much on your mind?"

"I am considering marriage, Hobbs." Mason answered thoughtfully.

"Quelle surprise" Hobbs responded with some humour. "The beautiful Will Graham I presume."

"Indeed." They had mused on this a little before, Hobbs knew it was growing to become an obsession for his master. "There are few in this town who would be worthy of me, but he… His beauty is beyond compare, his skills also mark him out. He would be quite the prize."

"And he knows of your intentions?"

“Not as yet, but I don’t anticipate a problem.” Mason’s smile was cruel, he had never been refused - it was not something he allowed. “He will certainly not refuse the chocolate.”

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Will Graham woke with a start, the blankets soden with his sweat. He knew from the way his seven dogs cowered about the room, that he must have cried out in his sleep. Dreams of his father’s death haunted him even now that he had moved so far away. Even though the murderer was now dead - by his own hand no less. It was the loss that plagued him rather than his own actions, which he knew to be righteous. Crawford, the local lawman, had not felt the same way and Will had left before there had been a chance he would be arrested for the retribution that he refused to call murder. A vengeful death of a murderer.

Winston, Will’s closest companion of all his dogs, had moved back to the side of the bed and nuzzled into Will’s hand. Will smiled and comforted the dogs, regretting that he had scared them even though they were used to it. Before his father’s murder Will had even helped Crawford catch criminals - he was able to easily place himself in their minds. He understood them and so was able to assist with their capture - predicting what they might do next. The process of it often left him with terrible nightmares, making it difficult to know where the thoughts of the killers ended and where his own began.

Though Crawford gladly used him, Will knew he was considered by all in the town of his birth to be odd, perhaps even in league with the devil. It was only his usefulness to Crawford that kept the man from allowing the accusations of witchcraft to be investigated.

The light was coming in through the window now and Will knew he had slept too late, so caught up in the nightmare. He had planned to work on the steam engine he was building in his workshop whilst the light allowed, the months growing darker by the day.

He swung himself from the bed and pulled off his sodden nightshirt, remaining in his shorts as he grabbed a towel and began to dry himself. A knock at the door made him pause but it was the second insistent knock that moved him to the door of his small cottage without dressing. He frowned as he pulled open the door, aware that he ever had a reputation in his past for being surly - that he had no intention of caring about.

Beyond the door stood a few men he had never met, though he certainly knew some by reputation. Mason Verger stood at the fore, but it was the man who retreated behind him - Hobbs - who had knocked on the door for his master.

“Beautiful William, I see the name earned among the town folk is warranted. You are indeed very beautiful.” Mason’s words and tone dripped equal measures of sugar and poison - Will had met his kind before. Verger bowed and offered out his hand for Will to take. Will did not take it, instead making a show of moving the towel from his hand to his shoulder - an act that kept his hands busy, too busy for courtesy. A darkness passed over Mason Verger’s features but was quickly banished.

“I know you by reputation of course Monsieur Verger, what is it I can do for you?” Cold courtesy, if any at all.

Will saw the twitch in Verger's face through the false smile. Men like him always wore false smiles as their emotions ran so shallow, had they any at all. Will was well versed with men such as this.

"I wanted to visit, dear Will, to express my intention to court you, with a view to marriage."

Will was stunned to silence, the mix of amusement and shock snatching any words that might have left his lips. Possibly for the best as they would have been the sort of words that may have garnered violence from a man such as this. Will was not unused to advances. Despite doing his best to dampen his natural beauty, he still attracted admirers. This was something he discouraged to save them the wasted time once he opened his mouth and they realised the beauty did not sufficiently mask the petulant personality beneath. And unfortunately for them, Will was not one to remain silent and be purely ornamental. Had any of them been the sort he might have considered revealing his true inner self to - the horrors in his mind that spawned his nightmares - perhaps he would have been more amicable.

"That is very… kind of you Monsieur, however I do not intend to marry and would not want you to waste your affections." Will said as politely as he could and stepped back with the intention of closing his door.

Verger moved his cane quickly and stopped the door, Hobbs moving forward with his shoulder to keep the door open. "That is very unfortunate." He said seemingly to no one in particular.

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Will woke choking and spat blood before he could even register what was going on. He groaned as he tried to move, feeling that he was tied, hog tied, naked in a cage with hay beneath the knees he had been forced down on. The room was dimly lit but he could make out the shape of livestock - large hogs - in similar cages. Moreover he knew them from the smell that permeated the place. This was one of the livestock barns on the Verger estate.

As Will was trying to take stock of his situation, he realised he was not alone. The feet shuffled from the side of the barn towards him. He tried to move again but was badly bruised all over, his face was swollen but it didn't feel like anything was broken.

"Finally awake, Mason will be pleased." Hobbs spoke up. Will knew of Hobbs, not only as Verger's man but from rumours in the town about his family. They had apparently worked at Castle Lecter - a now abandoned and haunted castle (if you believed the rumours) - where he had murdered his wife and child. He maintained that they had left him, but rumours persisted. And Will could see it now. When this man stood behind Mason Verger it was a mask that cleverly hid his own villainy. It was clear to Will now and he knew he should be as afraid of Hobbs as he should be of Verger.

"Is this how Mason woos all his potential lovers?" Will asked, his words slightly muffled through his bruised face and aching jaw.

Flashes came back to him now of being hauled from his house, the door slammed on the dogs as they had tried to chase out. He had been beaten until he blacked out and could not say how

much earlier that had been. It could have been hours or days but he had no idea.

Hobbs stepped forward, Will could feel his eyes running over him, assessing him. The act was not sexual, more that he was evaluating him how one might with livestock or prey - deciding what parts would be of use. Will tried to fight the shiver it sent down his spine.

“You’re still of interest to him for now and you’ll wish to remain so. It’s when he loses interest you should fear.”

Will took in the warning, knowing it was the truth. He did not reply the words that wanted to fall from his mouth - his intent to be out of this situation very soon, one way or another.

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The sun set over Castle Lecter and the beast once known as Count Hannibal Lecter made his usual prowl of the grounds. Equal parts ensuring no trespassers and giving Hannibal time for contemplation, away from the castle. There were many days when he could not think clearly in the castle - the dark oppression of the curse weighed heavy in the air. Abigail and Randall were a constant reminder. His wards by circumstance, had escaped the curse that had befallen him and the castle, but he knew his own curse every time he looked upon their faces. He knew the beast they saw - the true reflection of the man within. Which of course was the point of the curse. Too late Hannibal had learned a lesson - to take more heed of those he was killing. Had he known that the murder and consumption of nothing more than a lowly peasant would result in the wrath of his mother - a witch of great skill - he might have been more careful.

Now he only dared leave the castle for the surrounding woods and no further, for fear of the nearby towns - having already been almost lynched once, he knew they were not accepting of his beastly form. Best that they know nothing more of his existence and he remains alone in the castle but for his young manservant Randall, and the deceased housekeeper’s daughter Abigail. They knew well enough not to fear him, and even so he knew how even they struggled to look upon him some days, so grotesque he appeared.

As he walked the perimeter of the grounds he stopped at the main gates. Once grand, the blackened wrought ironwork - the name “Lecter” emblazoned upon it - was overgrown and desolate. Hannibal gazed beyond them for some time, lost in thoughts of the world outside of the castle that was no longer open to him. He thought of his loneliness, pushing the thoughts down hard, knowing that he would never have an end to it. He tried not to think of such things often, he tried to be content with his lot. He knew that he was truly the beast and no one would ever look upon him and understand the man inside. The curse would never be lifted, that he was already resigned to. For who could ever love a beast.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal finally meet, and perhaps the curse might get lifted.

This chapter is a little more Disney, if Hannibal did Disney. There's even a sort of time-passing montage (you can set it to music in your head if you like).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will was glad of the numbness in his feet as he ran, it was preferable to feeling every branch, stone and thorn that he met. He only wished the same numbness would take the rest of his body, as the overgrown forest battered at his naked form. He was unsure how long he had been running, long enough that he no longer felt a shiver at the cooling air, his blood pumping hard in his veins. He didn't dare stop, he had no allusions to the fact that Verger would kill him if he caught up to him.

The day was darkening so it had to have been hours since he escaped. He had been in the barn for a little over a day - he could tell from the changing shadows cast by the sun beyond the barn door every time it was opened. It was opened often - workers coming and going, feeding the livestock and paying him no mind at all. He had called out to the first two but realised Verger probably paid handsomely for their blindness. Hobbs had come to him several times, bringing food on a couple of occasions.

They taunted each other with snide remarks. Will knowing that despite the darkness within the man, he would not risk further injuring Mason's prize, but they may make the man reckless. The remarks back mostly slipped past Will unnoticed - jibes about Mason's proclivities and the wedding night to come. Only one comment scored him deep and he tried not to let it show - a throwaway mention of Will's dogs. Mason had them and was considering starving them to see which would break first and eat the others. Will burned with anger inside. Once he was free and fit enough to be able, he would rescue the dogs. He had to believe that he could do so, that they weren't already dead.

On his last visit, Hobbs had come with a tape and began to measure Will, taking him from the cage but only loosening enough of his bindings to move him. Measured for a suit he assured, not a coffin - for now. Mason would want him to look very fine on their wedding day.

"You will not be able to measure my legs whilst I am bound this way. I am sure Mason will be happy with your estimations though." Will had goaded. He had a good sense of Hobbs now - the man would do anything to serve Verger, not for loyalty, but to maintain his own cover. Hobbs had thought for a moment and knew Will was right. He left and returned with

another man, a large brute who Will recognised from his kidnapping. It had been too much to hope for that Hobbs would untie him alone.

And so, with assistance, Hobbs removed the bindings. Will's muscles screamed with new aches as he was able to move once again. He was weak from the beating and being bound. Hobbs hauled him to his feet and pushed him at the henchman, who held him tight whilst Hobbs continued with his measurements. Will, weak as he was, was unsure when such a chance as this might present itself again - certainly he did not want to wait until his situation became worse - which it undoubtedly would. He had to do something in that moment, try to escape or die trying - he found he was resolved to that, which might have worried him if he didn't have more immediate concerns.

Will kept himself slack in the man's arms, as though he had no strength left at all - making him work to keep a grip. This made it all the easier, when Hobbs stood to face him, to lunge at Hobbs. It caught his captor off guard and by the time he tightened his grip Will had already done the damage he intended, latching his teeth into Hobb's throat. As the henchman realised his mistake and pulled Will back, Hobbs' throat came with him, tearing away in a gush of blood. Hobbs dropped to his knees gasping for breath as he held his hands to his throat in an increasingly failing attempt to keep the flowing blood within his body.

Will felt as if he was being crushed, the man's grip becoming tighter, though he seemed too shocked and unsure to move from the spot. Finally he decided to throw Will back into the cage and try assist the dying Hobbs. The man did not get that far - the moment Will was released he pushed back on the closing cage with his legs, slamming it into the man and throwing him off kilter. Before he could regain his balance Will had rushed him - the man's back hit the floor hard, his neck snapping back and his skull connecting with a sickening thud. The man cried out and tried to right himself but Will was on him. He grabbed handfuls of hair and smashed the man's head back down to the ground, again and again until blood was being soaked up by the dirt and hay.

Will had run then, blindly. Naked and covered in blood he could have run for the town but feared Verger would just reacquire him there. Instead he ran into the forest - if he could hide long enough to recover enough to return for his dogs. Get them and go, move on again. A new life. Again. The thought was so tiring he almost didn't want to get far. Alone. Alone except the dogs, moving again, and still alone. He did not mind the solitude, welcomed it even, but it was hard especially at times where he felt his weakest, not to long for someone who could understand him. If just fleetingly. Such thoughts broke through his usually guarded mind now as he found himself stripped bare and hunted.

The cold and exhaustion weighed heavy on him, though physically he could increasingly barely feel either. Hobb's blood had dried from his chin to his chest along with the splatters from the other man and the wet dirt tracked from his feet up above his knees. He knew he had made the right choice avoiding the town. His word against anything Verger would claim - there would be no way out of it for him.

The air was slammed from Will's lungs as he hit the floor, looking back to see his foot tangled in a root. It took a moment to get himself free before he tried to stand, only now feeling the aches and cold. He tried to regain his footing but his ankle had twisted, the pain

shooting through him. He gave a short, sharp, cry and allowed his body to drop into the fallen leaves that surrounded him. Well, he had decided death was an option, he could not fight that now as he resigned himself to the frozen fate that awaited him.

A little time had passed, the exhaustion made worse by the violent shaking of his body, before the sun began to rise. As it did a shadow was cast. Will rolled slightly to see what formed the unusual shape. A castle stood beyond a thick wall. It would be hard to traverse, but there was hope. If he could at least get inside the castle it would no doubt be dry and warmer than outside. He might even find clothes or blankets, perhaps a fire that could be lit.

Will forced himself up, putting as little weight on his ankle as possible, he half dragged himself to the wall. Now closer he could see the true height and knew scaling it in his current condition was not an option. He followed it for a short while hoping to find a crumbled spot he could climb, but it was solid. He was about to give up when he spied the gates. Ominous and looming, the black gates held the monogram “Lecter” and Will found it chilled him further. He could see the castle clearly beyond now, through the barred gate. It truly did look haunted - Will might have thought twice about seeking shelter there had he not something darker on his heels.

The gate was unmovable and Will ended using the last of his strength to climb it. Once atop he lost his footing and fell, no energy to catch himself, he fell like a dead weight to the floor below. It knocked the air out him but it was hard to know whether it had done any damage beyond that between the cold and his existing injuries. He urged himself to move and found there was no energy left. He had come this far, but now was the end. He had decided he would escape one way or the other - a great pity death would be his escape when he come so close to getting away.

Everything went black.

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“Where is he?” Mason Verger raged.

His staff cowered back, none dared to answer. The barn was full of blood and gore, and Mason was angered that it now covered his shoes. His shoes were covered with Hobbs, which he felt was some sort of irony regarding the man. He didn’t have long to think on the humour of it, his mind quickly consumed with the loss of William Graham.

Bloody footprints answered his question anyway - clearly Will had made off into the forest.

“Prepare the horses, we’re going hunting.”

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The scent of fresh but dried blood filled Hannibal’s nostrils with a sharp flavour of something familiar. Looking up he saw Randall enter with a body in his arms. Naked, bloodied and dirty, Hannibal hadn’t seen another person outside their small company for quite sometime. Even in this state the body looked beautiful - the skin was as porcelain and begged to be touched. The scent and sight before him, Hannibal found, left him temporarily unable to

focus - he wasn't even sure if the stranger was yet living but just the idea of someone existing beyond the three of them was unnerving.

"Master…" Randall addressed him, breaking his thoughts. "He was by the gates. I found him when I returned from hunting in the forest. There had been a hunting party from the town also, but it had turned back. Perhaps they sought this man…"

As Randall dropped him to the floor the body took in a sharp breath but did not stir.

"Alive…" Hannibal mused. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. "He is injured?"

"Some." Randall replied. "He's been beaten but the blood isn't his as far as I can tell."

"No. Not all of it." Hannibal agreed, the scent becoming clearer as his mind unfogged and he allowed his keen senses to separate it out. Hobbs. Abigail's father who had killed her mother and tried to kill her.

Hannibal had not played host since his curse and had no plans to. Had the blood of Hobbs not covered this man, he might have had him dumped back out in the forest to his fate, or even in his cellar to make a meal or two of. If this man was covered in the blood of Hobbs, then Hannibal would know more. He could always kill him once information was imparted.

"Lock him in the tower." Hannibal ordered and started from the room. He stopped on a second thought and turned. "Have Abigail take him some food and water." The realisation hit him, that at the least they could not let the man leave to bring others back with him to hunt the beast they all believed a legend - a ghost story.

Hannibal was glad to leave the room, moving quickly to the gardens. He was used to the company of Abigail and Randall. Randall he had known from a young man and Abigail was barely more than a child. They were almost family in his familiarity with them. It was comfortable. Hannibal had not realised that the presence of a stranger would bother him so deeply. His only hope to end his curse would be through a stranger, should it come at all of course, perhaps even this stranger. That thought was not lost on him. Perhaps he was too used to his life as it had become, perhaps he didn't want to reveal himself to someone. For that was what it would take - to be completely seen by someone and have them love him regardless, only that would lift the curse. The witch had doomed him, for they both knew that he would be forever unseen and alone.

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Will came to suddenly. He wasn't sure where he was but when he tried to quickly sit and assess his situation, he found his body ached too much to allow it. He groaned involuntarily and allowed himself instead to decipher where he was from the little he could discern. The ground beneath him was cold - a thin layer of straw covering hard stone. He was cold. He was still naked and he could feel, now that he focused, the blood dried tightly on his skin. He turned his head to get a look at his less immediate surroundings. It was dark and Will could only make out that he was in a small room - a cell. To his side, shoved into the corner there was a pile of what looked like fabric. He could just reach it and pulled it over as he tried again to sit, this time with more success. The fabric was a rough hewn blanket which he

quickly wrapped himself in and felt immediate relief from the cold. The smell was rancid, but he was willing to put up with it for the little comfort it afforded.

Will must have nodded off, propped up in the corner facing what he could make out to be a thick wooden door. He woke with a start as the door opened. A girl entered the room with a small pail of water, a sponge floating on top, and in her other hand a small bowl. She set both down, looking at Will with some fear as if trying to decide whether to just turn and leave. Instead, surprisingly, she reached up to open the slats of a window Will had not noticed, allowing in the morning light, before returning to her items. She held out the small bowl to Will, who took it and could see at once it was some sort of porridge or gruel. It was simple but the aroma made him realise how long it had been since he had last eaten and how hungry he was. He went to scoop his hand into the bowl but the girl was immediately there and took hold if his arm, shaking her head, her eyes wide. He stopped and looked at her as she moved the pail forward and sat beside him, retrieving a sponge from the water and taking his hands to clean them. Looking down now he could see that she was washing away dried blood and mud and whatever else the forest had bestowed on him. When she finished washing his hands he smiled.

“Thank you.” He told. Despite his voice coming out quiet and raspy, she startled a little but then nodded an acknowledgment. Before he could continue, she reached into the pocket of her dress and pulled out a wooden spoon, handing it over with a smile.

Will accepted it and returned the smile. He started to eat as she soaked the sponge again, catching him a little off guard as she began to wash his feet.

“You don’t need to do that.” He said with his mouthful. “I can manage if you give me the sponge.” He moved to take it from her, his blanket that had covered the bulk of his midsection, started to slip. The girl let out a slight squeal of alarm at the sudden movement and ran to the door. She hadn’t closed it, perhaps she had correctly assumed that Will would not risk hurting a girl in order to escape past her. Will hadn’t noticed that a figure had appeared beyond the doorway.

As the girl ran she was caught up in shadowy, dark arms. Will could make out a large and beastly shape - he couldn’t tell if it was a trick of the light or of his mind that there appeared to be antlers atop the beast’s head. Seeing the girl run directly into his clutches, Will went to move to her aid but was slowed by his injuries. He made an unsteady step before losing his footing and falling hard on one knee. His eyes did not leave the girl all the while, but he could see now she didn’t seem afraid. She nestled herself into the beast’s form, his head bowing down and seemingly whispering something to her before letting her go. She stole a quick glance back at Will before disappearing down flagstone steps.

The figure loomed at the door and for a moment seemed to pause before closing the door.

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Again, Will didn’t realise he had fallen asleep until he awoke. The slats were still open and the light was a warm glow of a late afternoon. He had washed the rest of the blood and dirt and finished the food. He had grown thirsty but couldn’t bring himself to drink the soiled

water. He wasn't sure he had fallen asleep, perhaps he had passed out. He certainly woke now - still cold and aching - with a burn of thirst in his throat.

He saw now the pail and bowl had been removed and replaced. A tarnished silver tray held a small cup and a jug of clean water, as well as a plate of meats, cheeses and fruit. A much fancier fare than before, and appreciated.

Will drank down half the jug before settling back and taking up the plate of food. It all tasted good and Will was glad of it. A moment of reflection later made him wonder at how easily pleased he had been by this meal. Truly, he should be concerned - he was cold, naked, a prisoner. He was in no better position than he had been a day before. With the exception that he assumed Mason Verger was not his captor.

The question seemed answered when the door opened sometime later. He had finished the food and had only a little water left. The window faced the setting sun and so there was still light, though not much longer. The girl had returned. Silent as before she brought in a fresh jug, retrieving the almost empty one and the plate before retreating. Again she left the door open. He heard her steps retreating and wondered if he should try to escape.

He tested each of his limbs, feeling the aches some worse than others. He planted his feet and tentatively tried to stand, gritting his teeth through the pain of it. He hadn't taken a step before he realised a looming figure stood beyond the door again, just out of the reach of the light.

"What is your name?" A deep and rumbling voice asked.

Will startled, dropping back onto the straw and blanket he had gathered into much of a nest in the corner. The figure did not move. He could see again it was that beastly shape crowned with antlers.

"Wi...William Graham…" He said quickly, moving back into the corner as tightly as he could. There was a darkness about this figure, beyond it's looming form. Something Will could feel, could identify with as a reflection of the darkness he tried to keep buried within himself.

The acknowledgment from the creature was a snorting grunt, blowing a little steam into the cold air.

After several moments of silence Will decided to start with one of the many questions that had pressed his mind since waking up in the cell.

"Am I your prisoner?" He asked.

Another snort and then silence for another moment. "No… Yes. For now maybe… I cannot allow you to leave - you will bring others back here to bring low the castle and those within."

Will was surprised by the eloquence of the words from such a form. "I would not." He finally managed. "I am running myself, I plan to retrieve a few possessions and leave as soon as I can. Before my captor catches up with me."

“You have escaped imprisonment, that is how you came to be here in this state.” The beast spoke but it was not a question, more a consideration that Will hoped worked in his favour. There was another pause. With the door and window open to the fading light a breeze passed through causing Will to shiver and draw the blanket closer.

“You’re cold.” The figure observed.

“... I’m naked.” Will replied, seeing the figure withdraw slightly at his surly tone.

“I should have… I didn’t… I, Abigail, I asked her to tend to you but I did not specify clothes or coverings. I will have her bring you something.” Will could see a slight hesitation before the beast turned to leave.

“Wait!” Will called out. It seemed fair to assume that he wasn’t going to be immediately killed, there may even be a chance that he could negotiate his release. This beast was obviously the master of Castle Lecter, perhaps he could be convinced to let Will go - he had no intention to go from captor to captor.

The beast turned. In the further darkness the form blurred at the edges but the light reflected his eyes - red dots glowing in the dark.

“Um, thanks…” Will said. It seemed ridiculous to him to thank his captor for such slight kindnesses as food and clothing - surely anyone would do that much if not more. But he knew his thanks would be appreciated by this strange form. He could feel how much the beast appreciated such niceties - there was a general feeling of dislike of the rude, a sense of haughty decorum, that Will picked up on even in their brief interaction.

The beast blinked and Will thought he may have inclined his head but it was too hard to make out in the fading light. There was a snort of acknowledgment and then the door was closed and the figure gone.

Will was left alone, pondering how easy it had been to read the beastly form before him. Easier than any of the killer’s minds he had slipped into. It was at once disconcerting and yet somehow felt like home.

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Hannibal walked slowly up the tower steps to see his prisoner. He wondered at his hesitation and put it down to his unfamiliarity with having a stranger in his home. He stopped when he heard small footsteps, waiting until Abigail descended to where he was. She must have just taken up more food and it reminded him how stupid he had been not to ask her to take him clothes. She only ever did what she told him, to the letter. She wasn’t scared of him, he knew that, but she was scared that she would be turned out and so offered her obedience in exchange for her home with him. He had long ago given up on trying to convince her he would not make her leave. He had more important work with her - trying to work on getting her to talk again. When her father had slit her throat he had not done damage enough to cause the girl to go mute, and yet she had not uttered a waking word since that day - though in her sleep she often cried out for her mother.

The girl gave a gentle smile when she saw him coming up the stairs. The smile changed slightly, almost a smirk that Hannibal read well.

“I… He should be more comfortable don’t you think. If we are to keep him here?” He tried to explain himself under her gaze. He had already assured her and Randall over their evening meal the night before, that he would keep the prisoner to ensure their safety. They had both seemed relieved - they had found a peace in this place that he was yet to fully find himself - and they knew that returning the man to the town risked him returning with a mob at the very least.

The smile remained as she passed him, a hand gently stroking his arm as she passed.

It was mid morning and a bright day, one of those crisp autumn days where the chill wind is welcome as the sun is so intense in it’s heat. But of course this meant that if the window were open, the cell would be well lit. Hannibal swallowed down a strange feeling - nervousness?

He opened the door, a gentle shove so that it would swing without him standing too close. He remained instead in the shadows beyond the door. The captive looked up. He was dressed now, simply in a tunic and breeches, two clean blankets had also been brought up. He was eating the plate of bread and meat Abigail had brought, but politely set it aside when he saw Hannibal. The prisoner smiled and Hannibal felt a pull inside him that was almost painful.

“Thank you, for the clothes and food.” He said through the smile that had completely thrown Hannibal. Hannibal inclined his head in acceptance of the thanks, before clearing his throat.

“You, um, we can’t let you leave. I won’t risk it, I won’t risk the safety of my wards. I can’t trust that you won’t return with a mob, or cause a mob to form by telling of us. I have seen it before - I am not welcome here and it is best the locals believe me to be long dead.” Hannibal’s words came out faster than normal, trying to explain himself.

William Graham did not lose his smile but nodded in understanding. “I understand, you don’t know me, you can’t trust my word. But perhaps I can earn that trust? As I mentioned before, I only wish to leave so that I can gather my things and leave this town before I am forced to marry Mason Verger.” The smile faltered a little and William added quietly. “Verger owns that town, no one will protect me from him. If I remain he will get what he wants…” The young man trailed off and looked a little abashed at the words he perhaps hadn’t meant to add.

“You have no one in the town you would not leave behind?” Hannibal found the words falling out as he thought them.

“No.” a low chuckle as though Hannibal had said something amusing. “No, I really don't. I never quite fit in there. They think I’m strange.”

“Marrying Verger might have changed your position.” Hannibal mused, trying to ignore the strange ease he felt when speaking with the man, an ease he sometimes didn’t always feel Randall and even Abigail.

Another low laugh, deep from Will's chest, warmed Hannibal. "Maybe." a shrug. "can't say if be much interested in either marrying Verger or fitting in. Much happier on my own… just me and my dogs."

Hannibal nodded.

More silence. During which William looked quite content but Hannibal's ease was edged with caution over how easy this made him feel.

"As you are to stay then perhaps you would be my guest rather than my prisoner." Hannibal muttered, his words trailing off slightly. He pulled his confidence back to him. "Of course, I would expect you to stay within the grounds, to not attempt escape. To do so would mean your death."

William looked to be considering it, as if there was anything to consider. In reality he'd still be a prisoner.

"Come into the light." The young man finally said.

He did so and William smiled. William was not afraid.

*

The first Will had seen of the master of the castle was a hoof. It had stepped into the light, hesitantly, before drawing the body forward so Will could finally see what this man had been hiding.

Atop the hooves was dark brown and black fur, the look of a lion that walked as a man, his hands claws. Antlers as black as sin adorned his head. His eyes were a brown that held red at it's core and should be frightening, but Will found a softness there that made them the most pleasing aspect of his beastly appearance. He felt himself smile.

Before he had been congenial to both the girl and this beast, a manipulation in the hopes that he could open negotiations of release at some point - he had to lay the groundwork. As they had spoken he found a genuine smile in talking with the beast. He was endeared by the hesitation of such an imposing form. He was intrigued by how easy it was for him to see this man. And so he smiled when he saw the form fit the man so completely. His nightmares were haunted by killers who hid behind their skin, a reminder that perhaps he himself did the same - his beauty not reflective of the person within. Beasts roamed his mind during his sleeping hours and they scared him for their symbolism. It was the greatest relief, a gift almost, to finally see someone as they should be, as they were inside.

At a slow, limping pace, he had followed the beast from the tower, the cold flagstones ending in polished floors and lush carpeting. Art on the walls was dark and grotesque and yet much of it was strangely beautiful.

"It is clear you are the master here. Is the girl your daughter?" Will asked as they walked.

A darkness crossed the beast's features, so subtle that even Will almost missed it. His words had struck something and he was unsure whether the beast was going to answer. After a short pause he finally replied. "She is my ward, I took her in and she has become much like a daughter to me. Her mother worked her and was murdered by her husband. Abigail survived. When I was cursed the staff fled the castle, all except Abigail and my manservant Randall."

Will nodded. He could tell there was something deeper there but he had no intention of pushing. As the way had been opened though, he freely enquired about the curse.

"May I ask what happened?"

The beast hesitated for a moment. Curses were oft times a punishment, and something such as this that certainly seemed most likely. He was curious as to what this man had done. When the silence continued a little longer Will spoke again. "I am happy if you do not wish to tell me, but I would prefer you not to lie. I can read people very well and lying… it really bothers me. It's transparent to me, so tell me nothing rather than lie." He shared that small amount of himself.

"You have a gift." The beast told him. "You see people easily."

"Ha!" Will's chuckle was low and deep, borne of resentment to those who had tried to use his 'gift'. "If it is a gift then there are others that think it there for them. I spent a long time using it for other people. It is… draining."

"I killed and ate a young man who was rude to me." The beast suddenly admitted.

Will couldn't bring himself to even feign shock. He was no stranger to the evils of man, and of all men who could see the darkness in this one. Knowing the type of darkness he harboured was actually comforting to Will. It was a relief to see it on the outside, his mind not overworking to seek the darkness within when it was so plain to see.

"I see." He finally replied. He really meant 'I see you'.

-

He had been shown to a beautiful guest room and the beast had requested his presence at dinner. Will had accepted with a smile, touched by the courtesy of being invited when in truth he was a prisoner here.

As the beast turned to leave Will stopped him with a hand on his arm. The fur beneath was thick, it reminded him of a heavy-coated dog, but for the silkiness of it. For his part the beast seemed startled at the touch, automatically pulling away slightly. Will removed his hand quickly to ease any discomfort.

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to ask before you left - I don't know your name."

"Hannibal Lecter the Eighth. Count Lecter… Hannibal." Will smiled as the beast reeled through the names, obviously unaccustomed to introducing himself. Will could imagine in

the distant past he would need no introduction, and in more recent times, no one to be introduced to.

“I will see you at dinner, Hannibal.” Will smiled before closing the door.

*

Dinner came and went. Days came and went. And as time wore on Hannibal became more and more confused. A mixed feeling within him of discomfort that Will - as he preferred to be called - was so easy with him, and pleasure in it too.

Days started to become weeks and they fell into an easy routine. Meal times together, sometimes a walk together around the gardens in the morning. Will would often read in the library or tinker with some of the broken down and ill-maintained equipment and amenities around the castle. Abigail had seemed delighted when he had made her a small lamp that would spin and cast decorative shadows on the walls. He was easy with Abigail too, seemed to understand her without her needing to speak - something that Abigail quickly and obviously adored him for. It was as if the three of them had always been together. They would spend the afternoons together and when Abigail went to bed, he and Will would sit in the study by the fire and drink a glass or two of whiskey.

Randall took more a of a begrudging view. The young man seemed both jealous of Will’s easy won favour with Hannibal, and equally enamoured with him. The sullen and withdrawn servant became more so, and Hannibal hoped it was something that he would get over with time.

Winter came and the snow began to fall and still Will lived with them. For many weeks now Hannibal had made no effort to confine Will, and truth be told he would have not stopped him had he attempted to leave. Will saw everything, could see Hannibal so clearly, that he must know that, and yet he stayed.

When the lake at the bottom of the estate froze over Will insisted that Hannibal and Abigail join him in ice fishing. He had been teaching Abigail to fish, and Hannibal had passed by now and then, but rarely stayed. But now Will insisted. He had cut a hole in the ice, which fascinated Abigail who set immediately to preparing a lure. Will stepped out onto the ice before looking back to see that Hannibal had not followed.

“Come on Hannibal, Abigail wants to show you how good she is at fishing.” He smiled warmly and Hannibal moved forward as if compelled, unable to deny Will anything, he was slowly realising this.

He was just coming astride Will when his hooves slipped on the ice, his balance unused to the slippery surface. He anticipated the hard ice striking him as he turned into the fall, but instead found arms holding him up. Will had stepped in close and had halted the fall by catching Hannibal in his arms, the beast’s arms had automatically looped around Will to catch himself. Will smiled at the shocked beast and then set him back up on his feet, stepping back when he realised that Hannibal seemed unnerved by the closeness. They had never been this close to each other before. Besides that one and only touch when Will had been moved to the guest chambers, they had not physically made contact until now.

Hannibal stood, testing his hooves on the ice. Making a show of it so that Will carried on to catch up with Abigail - needing the distance between them. Even so Will stole a glance back at him, something warm and tender in that look.
Was he imagining this? Maybe it was just because they spent so much time together. There couldn't be more to it. He was alone, Will was alone and together they seemed to be whole, in his mind. But he did not want to let himself dwell on it. One day Will would leave. If he did not leave then perhaps Hannibal would tell him. What? That he was falling in love? Was that what this was? And then Will would reject him. Better to stay silent and appreciate Will while he remained.

But. Did he really imagine it? *He glanced at me, I thought I saw, and when we touched he didn't shudder at my claw.*

*

Hannibal was quiet that night. Abigail, exhausted from the day of fishing and laughing and playing in the snow, retired early. Now they sat in front of the fire and the beast was silent. He was not a man of many words much of the time - only speaking when there was something worth saying, a quality that Will admired greatly.

In these many weeks they had shared stories of their lives. Will had never known anyone as well as he knew Hannibal, and had never let himself be known in return as he did. They had shared stories beyond that - Hannibal had explained how he was a descendant of the warlord 'Hannibal the Grim' who had built the Castle and was the first of their name. He had told him of how he ended up guardian of Abigail, of Hobbs. Will had admitted killing the man, and at first when he discovered from Hannibal that Abigail was the man's daughter he had asked if he should feel bad for robbing her of a father. Hannibal had laughed lightly that Hobbs was no father and Will would fill the role better than the deceased man ever had. Will had glowed at that. Hannibal's words so unguarded - betraying his thoughts, his feelings, that they were a family.

Will had felt that way himself for sometime. He loved Abigail as a daughter, he loved Hannibal. Didn't he? Yes, he realised. He loved him, the first and only person who he had ever been able to truly see and who he let see in return. Who he confided in about the people he had killed, the nightmares, the blurring between him and the killers he had previously helped apprehend. That he had liked it. As a prisoner in this castle, he was more free than he had ever been.

"You're quiet tonight." He said as he raised a glass to his lips. Hannibal raised his head and looked over, Will meeting his eyes over his glass.

"For quite sometime now Will I have made it, I believe, clear that you could leave. I wouldn't have stopped you, I wouldn't have come after you, and yet you have stayed. Was it not clear you could leave?"

"It was clear." Will confirmed with a smile and a slight frown, unsure where Hannibal was going with this. Did he want Will to leave?

"You stayed." Hannibal stated.

“I did.” He agreed.

Hannibal went quiet again, a thoughtful frown creasing his heavy and furred brow.
Will stood with a sigh and walked to Hannibal’s chair. He stood for a moment before letting his hand fall where it wished, stroking down the furred side of Hannibal’s face, where once there might have been a beard. He felt the beast shudder and didn’t know if he had misread these weeks.

“Did you want me to leave?” Will asked. He would understand if he did. He could see how heavily his presence weighed on Hannibal often - so unused to being seen so clearly, being so bare to someone. He could see how Hannibal sometimes felt uncomfortable with the vulnerability that Will caused in him. Perhaps it had become too much. Perhaps where Will had found a home and contentment in freedom, Hannibal had become a prisoner in his own castle, with Will as the guard of his true self.

Hannibal closed his eyes.

“No.” The word rumbled from Hannibal’s chest, almost a growl. Such a brutal sound compared to Will’s gentle touch. “Will you stay? Will you leave me one day Will?”

“If you want me to stay then I will never leave you. If you asked me to go I would die a miserable death.” Will replied. He wasn’t entirely surprised by the tears that slowly wet the fur below Hannibal’s eyes.

-

Will woke warm. Hot even. Despite the cold that permeated the stone walls of the castle when the fires burned low, the heat of Hannibal’s fur stifled him. After their confessions at the fireplace they had retired to Hannibal’s lavish chambers. Will regretted that their relationship would not be physical given the difference of their forms, and yet he found it didn’t matter. Their love connected them on a deeper level. They allowed tender touches, lingering looks, and gentle embraces. He could feel Hannibal reigning back all his strength as they lay in his bed, Hannibal curled around Will as Will confessed his love. Hannibal cried and was unable to speak, he just held Will closer, seemingly scared to lose something he thought he would never have.

But now the morning light woke Will and he realised that he had spoken too soon. Not that he didn’t mean it, but that he had things he needed to do. Things he had kept thinking of and yet had been unable to bring himself to leave. But now that Hannibal knew he would never leave, that he would never abandon him, he had to go and resolve these thoughts before he could return and never leave again. He had to go and kill Mason Verger, he had to free his dogs, if they yet lived - something he had come to terms with long ago that it was unlikely.

He silently slipped from the bed and returned to his own chambers. He packed the few things he would need, he hoped to be back before nightfall. Then he visited the study on his way out, leaving Hannibal a note of explanation on his monogrammed stationary.

Hannibal

I will say it again now as I did before, I love you deeply. No one has ever seen me as you do, the real me and not the beauty of the surface, and I can never thank you enough for that.

I want to be here forever, I want us to never be alone again. But before I can do that I have to do one last thing. Once Mason Verger is dead by my hands I will return and be forever yours.

With my deepest affection
WG

*

Randall watched as Will Graham left the way he had arrived - over the rusted gate. He was surprised considering how much he and Hannibal clearly admired each other. How his master had made it very clear for sometime that Will could leave and yet he hadn't until now.

It was early, he was always up before everyone else. He often hunted during the dawn or dusk. He moved through the castle, imagining Will's exit - knowing he had stayed in his master's chambers that night. Randall ended in the study and saw immediately the note left propped on the mantel. He unfolded and it read the words. His guts twisted. Anger? Jealousy?

He had never spent much time with the Count, not even with Abigail. He had kept chambers in the servant's quarters even when he was offered a bed chamber in the castle as Abigail had been. He preferred to maintain an awed distance from his unknowing surrogate mentor. He did basic duties as a manservant, and spoke only when spoken to. One day, he knew, one day would be the right day to ask the count to teach him - to mentor him in the ways he hunted. He wondered if it was like how he had hunted since boyhood - with tooth and claw, with a suit of armour he had made of wolves that he had killed.

When Will had arrived he realised his time had passed. Any little interest the count might have had in him was gone. And Will, Will was beautiful and deadly. Of course the count would love him, Randall could see some of what he could see. These long weeks he had struggled to keep from his mind the naked and bloody form of the man when he had found him. He felt torn between the two men that didn't even notice him beyond a shadow that moved through the castle parallel to them.

Randall lit the fire, as had become his duty. Once the flames caught he dropped the note in and watched it burn to ash.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, part 3 is pretty much still just in notes and I'm currently really needing to get my shit together for Tristhad Week, so it might be a little while in coming, but it will be completed soon I promise!!

In the meantime, hope you enjoyed this! Comments are always appreciated :D <3

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

> Will returns to try and recover his dogs, Randall plots against Will, an enemy is made of Mason, and Hannibal spectacularly overreacts (as is his way)

Chapter Notes

> So sorry for the delay! I had distraction of family stuff, Tristhad Week and other writing projects, but I have finally finished this and hope you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Hannibal woke he felt the warmth on the other side of the bed, but Will was gone. Not far, presumably. Hannibal stretched out on the bed waiting for Will to return and must have dozed off again - sleeping more soundly than he had in a long many years. When he woke once more the bed was cold and Will had not returned. He felt a sinking feeling - a fear he had managed to crush for a time, but had never really left him. A paranoia that Will would reject him sooner or later regardless of his professions of love.

He moved from the bed and to the window, opening it to feel the sobering cold. Or so he wanted to believe. Really, he wanted to look at the faint reflection held there and confirm his fear. If love was to lift the curse, then surely he would once more be a man and no longer a beast.

The roar of despair that he felt start in his chest, ripped through the room, shaking the glass in the window.

*

The further Will moved from the castle the more guilt ate away at him. Guilt at leaving his dogs so long. The truth was, though he had thought of them often and considered leaving more than once - perhaps even asking Hannibal for his help - he had known in his heart they were dead before he left that tower cell. There was no scenario in his head that had Mason Verger keeping his dogs alive, especially as he had no reason to doubt the taunt Hobbs made about his dogs. Verger had taken and murdered his pack, he knew that had to be true and had tried to deny it.

But, waking next to Hannibal, feeling so content… he knew he had to make sure. He knew he had to do something, because for too long he had selfishly stayed with Hannibal when he

could have tried to check on them. He hated himself in no small part because of it. He couldn't continue to ignore it, he couldn't let himself be happy with Hannibal until this was resolved.

And either way, he was going to kill Mason Verger.

*

Randall heard the Count raging through the castle. He heard the smashing of furniture in his chambers and then the study, almost as though he were trying to erase the very memory of Will Graham having been there. He listened, waited and listened, as the beast proceeded out into the gardens, the door ripped from it's hinges.

His smile was involuntary. He had not really known what would happen, how the Count might react. Perhaps, once he had calmed, he could comfort Hannibal. Remind him how much better it might make him feel to hunt and perhaps Randall could be part of that. Perhaps they could develop their relationship to one of mentor and mentee, perhaps the Count could teach his ways of hunting, killing, consuming. Randall was a young man when the curse first fell, but he knew himself well, he had killed many times and recognised this in the Count, and knew the Count recognised it in him. He knew if he stayed and waited, Hannibal might share that darkness. Teach him, maybe more.

But the Count never seemed to notice him. Indeed, regularly the Count would hunt, kill, consume and Randall would admire and attempt to engage with him. He was sure Hannibal knew of his interest in learning his ways and yet he was denied each time. Years had passed this way, and Randall grew bitter at the refusals.

He had not planned to act on this bitterness, and yet. And yet. He followed the Count on hunts where he could - usually lost quickly, the Count did not want to be followed and knew how to lose Randall easily. On less than a handful of occasions he had been able to get close enough to at least glimpse who was destined for the Count's table, if not the murderous act or butchering itself. The last of these occasions he had come so close, close enough to see the chosen victim being enticed away by the Count, but the Count knew he was there. He had turned and looked at him, a burning warning in his eyes. He was intruding, the Count would consider this rude no doubt, and yet the glare was all he received as the Count moved off with his quarry.

Was it fear of what the Count might do to him? Was it the bitterness at another rejection? Randall would probably never know. When the mother of the young man appeared he recognised her at once - she was a well known witch in those parts. He could not say what was in his mind when he approached her and told her she would be too late, Count Lecter would have disposed of her son in short order. Had he known what she might do? Perhaps not exactly, perhaps not to the finer points, but it was clear she would do something. And the curse - it had been perfect.

When the curse had befallen the castle, everyone had left in fear - especially those who had somehow never suspected anything untoward about their master, driven away sickened with this new knowledge. Only young Abigail, little more than an infant, had stayed with no

choice - there was no one to take her away. But that did not matter - the master had been kind and raised her as his own.

Randall stayed.

Of course he did, because this was perfect. More perfect than he could imagine. He would stay and given time, he was sure, the Count would teach him. And if he did not? In some ways it did not matter - they would be trapped there together. No one else would ever come, it would be just them.

He would be damned a fool if he let some interloper come in and take this from him. An interloper he had brought in. He cursed himself daily for it. When he had found the man he had been elated - finally an opportunity that could not be ignored. The Count no longer hunted, killed, consumed. But this stranger might change that - he had brough William Graham to the castle thinking that the Count would finally teach him. They would take the man to the cellars and butcher him together, consume together. Finally.

But that had not happened. And now as the Count raged, Randall could not hide a smile. Could not even try to hide his elation. When Will Graham returned the beast would rend him limb from limb and Randall would be there. He would hand him the knife.

*

It was the afternoon when Will reached the Verger estate but he waited until dusk before venturing further. He made quick work of checking the livestock sheds and the scattered stables, looking for signs of the dogs. It was a barn nearer to the stables next to the main house, that Will found out the fate of his pack.

Both sides of the barn were lined with cages, over half of which contained dogs in a varying state of starvation it would seem. The centre of the barn was well worn and layers of hay did a poor job of soaking up blood found there. The cages looked fairly new, months old. As long as Will had been gone, that was how old it seemed.

Some of the dogs looked up as he snuck in, some cowered and barked, others growled. He searched quickly for signs of his own pack, eyes passing over each cage until finally he found the one and only member of his pack that resided in the barn. Winston's cage was towards the other end of the barn and those surrounding were empty. As he approached Will could make out the half starved frame. Winston did not make a noise, but he lifted his head heavily and wagged a thinned tail. Will's eyes filled with tears.

"I'm sorry." He said. Over and over he said it as he started trying to open the cage. He was just managing to unhook the hinges when he heard the barn door open. Quickly he hid in the shadows and watched as a serving man came in with a pail and began filling bowls with water and pushing them into the cages. His presence was driving the dogs savage but he ignored them as he went.

Will moved to try and better view what was happening whilst remaining hidden. He moved behind a crate and stood in slightly lower ground - a shallow pit. He looked down as he heard a crack, seeing then that he stood in a grave of dog bones. Small and large, all varieties. Will

tried to stay silent as he heaved. He looked back and saw the man drawing closer, a bowl for Winston in hand. He waited until the man was crouched to the cage before moving quickly and quietly behind him and placing his hand over the man's face. With a strength born of his rage, Will choked the man to unconsciousness.

When the servant came to, he was bound. He looked up at Will who had now released Winston and had been running his hands over the dog to ascertain the extent of his poor condition. Will let out a long breath, trying to remain calm as he walked to the man and crouched beside him.

"Is Mason in the house?"

"What the fuck are you doing in here, this is private property." The man strained against the rough hewn rope Will had found hanging in the barn, ignoring the blood that had dried on it.

"I'm going to take this really slow. Is Mason in the house?" He asked again before bringing out a knife and slicing slowly across the man's chest. The knife was sharp, his shirt shred easily, the skin beneath a little less yielding but was bloodied all the same.

The man screamed. The dogs howled.

-

It had taken little over an hour for the man to reveal all he knew. Mason was indeed home, would be likely found in his bedroom at this hour. Directions given begrudgingly.

The man had explained that Will's escape had sparked a new hobby in Mason Verger - dog fighting. He would starve the dogs and let them fight to the death, the victor getting the reward of a meal in his opponent. He had first started with Will's dogs. Half way through fighting them, he acquired more. Many of the gentlemen from the town would come and bet on the fights. It was great sport to them.

Only Winston remained as he refused to participate. He would lay down, wait to be killed and yet the opposing dogs would never do it. No matter how hungry they were, they would not attack the dog when he would lay there - abstaining rather than submitting. The dogs would whine, confused that their opponent did not attack, and then they too would lay down in defeat. In the beginning Mason would kill the other dog himself from anger, but he left Winston - intrigued. In the end he stopped putting him in fights but would only give the bare amount of food necessary to keep him alive. No, not to keep him alive apparently - just to take longer to starve him. His behaviour had embarrassed him in front of gentlemen, so this was his punishment - a drawn out death.

When Will could hear no more he relieved the man of the ring of keys looped at the waist of his breeches. With the keys he began opening the cages. One by one the dogs, some confused others eager, left their cages and began their escape. Some ran immediately into the forest, most advanced on the man Will had left tied. His screams sounded out as Will walked from the barn with Winston in his arms.

He set the dog down in the nearest stable, saddled one of the horses quickly and then stopped. He leaned against a stable door and quietly sobbed. Perhaps if he had come sooner he could have saved more dogs, perhaps even his own. He hated that he had been selfish to stay with Hannibal rather than believe his dogs to be yet living and save them.

Hannibal. How he wished he were with him, he needed him right now. But his comfort had to wait. He had to finish what he had come to do, and then he could return and fall into Hannibal's arms and allow the Count to care for him and help ease his pain.

Will emerged from the stables to the sight of dogs running around. There was barking and growling. None attacked each other despite their hunger, instead they appeared to be sniffing out trails - looking for more worthy prey no doubt, like the man in the barn. Will could see his remains as he walked passed the barn door - he was no longer whole and several dogs still remained, rending meat from bone.

As Will walked, several of the dogs gathered about him. Did they know his purpose? Perhaps so, as they came with him as he broke through the door to the servant quarters, made his way into the main house, continued up the stairs. On this journey they met three servants. As they had stepped forward, each in their turn, to stop Will they themselves had been stopped by the dogs. Will was as the eye of a hurricane of dogs as they tore down anything in their path. Finally at the room Will let himself and the dogs in.

*

When his rage finally subsided, Hannibal was at the lake. It was still frozen and the hole from the ice fishing still remained. He cursed himself a fool for believing Will could love him. Cursed Will for misleading him.

He wished he felt the cold through his fur, it might numb him. It might give him respite from these emotions he did not wish to feel. He slumped to the ground at the side of the lake. He lay there for some time, only looking up when he realised Randall was approaching.

"Master. Will Graham has gone, I saw him leave the grounds. I did not think to stop him…"

"No. He was free to leave. He made his choice." He could hear how hard his words sounded. For the best in front of Randall. The young man had been trying to curry his favour for years but Hannibal had never acquest. He knew the boy had stayed as he was a beast too, on the inside, but before the curse Hannibal had not wanted company in his kills. After the curse, the weight of his loneliness becoming apparent, he had considered Randall might understand him - but it did not take much to know this was not the case. For Randall, in truth did not want to know or understand him, only his methods - of which he had become enamoured. He had no doubt that, given time and teaching, he may have become Randall's meal. He had not turned him out of the castle as it was wiser to have him where he could keep an eye on him. In truth Randall could never hunt as he did - their reasons for doing so, for what they were, being so entirely different.

"Will you hunt him?" Randall asked.

The beast was surprised by such a bold question from one who had never been so bold before.

Hannibal did not reply. Instead he watched as Randall came closer and took a seat on the ground next to him. They had never been this close before. Perhaps this thing that had been unspoken for years - this want of Randalls' - was to find expression now. Forced to by the presentation and then removal of the obstacle that was William.

Hannibal was too tired to let his rage return, but in truth he felt it almost as ardently towards Randall now. Perhaps it was past time for Randall to be consumed. Hannibal considered this when he was surprised by the next words, if nothing else a reminder of how long Randall had known him, and yet never really known him.

"Did you feel like this when your sister left?" The words were hesitant, an attempt to force intimacy, to gain an emotional connection.

His sister had not left. She had been taken, they both had. When war had rolled through the kingdom and the castle captured. Death took their parents and servants when their hiding place - the hunting lodge on the grounds - was destroyed. But the children had survived for a worse fate. Captured by those who would profit from war, kept prisoner in their own home as the winter grew colder. As supplies ran lower. As the last of the food was consumed. Until they took Mischa and there was food again for a short while.

Hannibal could barely breath. The reminder of his childhood was unwelcome and unwanted, so deep did he keep it buried within him. His blood ran hot and mouth watered at the thought of destroying Randall.

"You love Will Graham. You loved your sister but they both betrayed you by leaving." Randall's words started tentative but then found their strength. He would have heard much of this from older staff, those who knew what had happened to the children and passed the stories down and down to the younger ones.

"Mischa did not betray me." He corrected angrily. Thoughtfully, for himself, he added "She influenced me to betray myself, but I forgave her that influence."

"If past behaviour is an indicator of future behaviour, there is only one way you will forgive Will Graham…" Randall led. He knew enough of the stories then, he knew of Mischa's fate.

"I have to eat him." Hannibal confirmed. More than that - it was not forgiveness of betrayal. No it would be more. If he consumed Will Graham, he would never be able to leave him again. He would always be with him as Mischa was.

*

"Cordell, is that you? The hour is late." Mason's voice in the darkness.

The dogs stalked around the room, rustling, growling. A light came on to reveal a confused looking Mason Verger.

“No, it is not Cordell.” Will replied.

Mason’s face cracked into a grin. “The beautiful William, in my bed chamber at last.” He went to rise from the bed but found dogs snapping at his feet and retreated back into the covers, trying not to look as terrified as he clearly was in that instant.

Will advanced on the bed, taking in the room. It was rich in decor, lavish. What a life he could have lived here. A wealthy prisoner to a madman. The bed had four posts. The table next to it had drawers no doubt full of paraphernalia that Will would not wish to know of. Atop it sat a tray - the tray held a pitcher and glass of wine and beside it a small container of opiate.

Will took up the container and sat next to Mason on the bed. “Will you do something for me Mason?”

Strangely, though perhaps not so strange for a madman, Verger was suddenly attentive. The dogs forgotten, he was overjoyed to have Will in his bed and was clearly wondering where this might lead. Will took just a moment to consider the man’s bizarre version of reality.

“Ask me.” He commanded, as well a rich man might.

Will lowered his head and looked up with heavily lidded eyes. He rarely used his beauty in his favour, but this was all too easy. How much had Mason already imbibed?

“I want to be with you Mason but I am still a little shy. Perhaps if we drank I would feel more comfortable…”

“Of course.” Mason replied jovially as though he was kicking himself for not already having thought of this. He reached for the wine and poured the glass for Will, to be polite, but drank himself from the pitcher. After the glass was drained he went to pour more but Will shook his head and instead held up the opiate.

It had taken no time at all to lay Mason low. Will only had that one glass, the rest was consumed by Mason, along with all the drug - the combination leaving him in a trance like state.

Why am I doing this? Will questioned himself as it had never been his intention to do anything other than kill the man. He felt his hunting knife heavy in his hand, where it had been for some time, and yet he had not killed Mason Verger. It was not that he could not kill the man, it was that a quick death would be too good for him. It was when one of the dogs sat by the side of the bed and whimpered up at him that he knew what to do. He could tie him as he tied the man before and let the dogs deal him a slow death. Or...

“Mason. Mason…” He had to shake the man to get his attention. A face, split by a grin like Will had never seen before, greeted him as Mason swayed on the bed as though it were spinning.

“What is this for? Testing the fat?” Mason giggled eyeing up the knife.

“Testing the fat?” Will was unsure of his meaning.

“Papa showed me how to test the depth of a pig’s fat.”

“Yes Mason. Let’s do that. Show me…” Will nodded. He put the knife into Verger’s hand and Verger moved to lean over Will and try to grab at the dog that sat next to the bed.

“No Mason, no. Show me on you.”

Verger continued to giggle as he started to slice into his own face. Strips came away and the dogs started to whimper, the smell of blood in the air. Laughing Mason began to throw the meat of his face to the hungry dogs.

-

Will was running again. This time a pack at his heels. He had taken a pleasure that he knew he probably shouldn’t in watching Mason carve his face. He was excited at the thought of taking pleasure in more - in killing the man. He took the knife, now bloodied and slippery, from Verger’s hand. He weighed it for a moment and considered - should he slit his throat or his gut? Which would be more painful? Take longer to kill him? Hannibal would know.

He found a sudden longing to have Hannibal here with him, that they might kill Verger together. His heart quickened at the thought.

“Master?” The door opened.

“Cordell…” Verger gurgled through the blood, a delighted tone, as he swept his hands wide to welcome the man who had entered the room.

Light from the door had fallen across the room, fallen on Will with the knife in hand. The larger man had immediately lunged but was brought down by one of the dogs. He tried to shake loose from the dog as Will ran - he could hear boots on the stairs at the commotion. He ran opposite - another door and a winding way out, the dogs at his heels.

To the stables, lifting himself and Winston into the saddle and urging the horse on. And so he retreated into the forest again, knowing the route now. The horse was fast of foot - leaving behind his pursuers easily. Finally he slowed, taking note of the pack around him with a smile. Bittersweet as he had been unable to save his own dogs, other than Winston, but perhaps this made some amends. The smile faltered though as he remembered he had failed in killing Verger, as disfigured as he had left him. Perhaps there would be opportunity again. Perhaps with Hannibal at his side - the thought making Will flush, his face burning red.

The forest grew quiet around him as they continued towards the castle and he knew they could not be far.

“I appreciate your assistance.” He told the horse with a smile, patting its neck. It whinnied and Will smiled again. The smile was broken abruptly as the whiny turned from acknowledgement to fear. A moment later the horse reared. With Winston across his lap, Will

lost purchase and fell to the ground, his dog atop him now held to his chest as the hoofs stamped down around them before the horse finally took to the undergrowth.

Will was panting as he looked about him, trying to ascertain the cause of the fright. His pulse racing as he set Winston aside. The dog whimpered, but it was drowned by growls from the rest of the pack as they drew around Will - now evidently one of their own. Their eyes better than Will's they all starred immediately ahead, towards the castle, and Will's eyes followed theirs.

In the dark he made out a form, beastly, towering in height.

"Hannibal?" Despite his relief at the thought of Hannibal, it was tempered by an instinctive feeling of fear in his gut - he was in danger.

The figure stepped forward and Will's fear came to the fore. It was not Hannibal. This was no beast. Before him stood Randall Tier, eyes wide and muscles straining under armour made from, it appeared, the bones of wolves.

"What is the meaning of this? Where is Hannibal?" Will asked, tramping down his fear as he regained his feet. He had, for the most part, avoided Hannibal's man servant. There was a darkness in him that Will did not want to see and was grateful that the man was rarely abroad. Perhaps it was the presence of Hannibal's beastly form that balanced out the other man in Will's mind. Never did he mention this to Hannibal, never wanting to upset him or have him feel that he had to choose between them. Will would never have done such a thing to Hannibal. So instead he kept his unease inside and avoided Randall where possible.

And now before him stood Randall's true form, fashioned himself rather than from a curse as Hannibal's had been.

"My Master seeks you in the forest, to rend you limb from limb for your betrayal." A sneer, he took humour in Will's look of confusion.

"Betrayal… I…"

"You left him. As you said you would not. I knew, though did not voice, that his downfall will be his compassion for you. I brought this fate upon us all by bringing you to the castle, and I shall now resolve it, if my Master cannot."

"Randall!" A booming voice from the darkness filled Will with both fear and love. If he was to die, let it be by Hannibal's hand and not by Randall's. He could hear his love approaching through the thicket, his words sounding ahead of him. "He is mine!"

"Yes Master." Randall swept lower and took a step back. The dogs watching and growling at the movement though they dared not advance.

Hannibal stepped forward, now lit by the moon above them.

Will gasped.

“Hannibal? Is… is that you?” Randall no longer in mind, Will took a step towards Hannibal - so he assumed it to be. Before him stood a handsome man, silvering hair and short beard, sharp cheekbones drew the eye, and cupid’s bow lips, but it was his eyes that captured him - soft brown with maroon at their core. From this Will knew the man to be his love. His heart raced and he stepped forward again, now level with Randall. “Hannibal.” He breathed the name - the only name he ever wanted on his lips.

The danger was forgotten. The dogs barked at the same time as Randall lunged for him and they spilled over onto the ground, a crack as a rib snapped in Will’s chest - the sound hidden by the clacking of the bones Randall wore. The dogs whimpered as they growled, some circling, all wanting to assist but kept at bay by fear of the strange creature before them.

“Randall, cease or you will meet the same fate as William.” The words twisted cruel from Hannibal’s mouth, cutting like a knife through his gut. The pain in his back that radiated around his chest was nothing compared to the tone of hatred in those words.

The man servant immediately retreated, Hannibal moving forward to take his place, towering over Will. Will couldn’t help the smile on his face as he gazed upwards, lost in Hannibal’s beauty.

“You left me Will, you promised you would not. You will not leave me again… I will consume you completely, not one part of you will be wasted…” There was conviction there, mixed in with hate and sorrow. He did indeed feel truly betrayed.

“No, Hannibal, I did not leave. I left you a note - I went to kill Mason Verger and now I return to you. You can lock me in the tower once more and keep me there forever if it pleases you, as long as you do not send me away. Or else, do consume me. Let me die by your hand and remain with you, because I could never stay away.” He could hear the tremble in his own voice, his words stilted by his lack of breath from the pain throughout his chest.

Hannibal seemed to hesitate. But then sighed, heavy and resigned. “It is the only way Will. Otherwise one day you will leave. Your love is false and I cannot forgive that.” The words were almost roared.

“No…” Will screamed as Hannibal’s hand thrust to his throat - squeezing it in his tightening fist. “I love you Hannibal.” The words choked from him. “If I did not… Would I see you… if I did not…” He struggled the words out even as he felt darkness dragging down his eyelids. As his breath grew short he reached up, stroking a hand down Hannibal’s bearded cheek. “So handsome…” the words strangled and barely audible now. “Would that I could kiss those lips… once… before death… if I could…” He wanted to strain upwards, to push himself up to Hannibal and press their lips together, but instead he fell back. Strength and life leaving him.

But life did not leave him. He felt instead, the pressure on his throat ease. Slowly his breath returned to him and he could hear his choking pants before he could feel them. It felt as though an eternity had passed before he could open his eyes - and when he did he looked upon Hannibal and smiled.

“What.. what do you see Will?” Hannibal’s words were tinged with anxiety. As Will reached up, Hannibal lowered himself to one knee and leaned over. “What Will, please?”

Will smiled, his hand coming up to stroke the bearded jaw. “I see you.” He let his hand fall from Hannibal’s cheek to his shoulder, grasping at the coat cloth there and using it to pull Hannibal to him - finding his lips and pressing a kiss to them.

There was a roar of anger that echoed around the trees as Randall stormed towards them.

“You cannot take him from me.” He all but screamed as he clamped a hand on Hannibal’s coat and threw him backwards. Then he was on Will and now, at this, the dogs acted. Surging forward as a pack they attacked Randall, their teeth latching onto the armour made of bones, destroying it where they could.

“No.” A roar from Hannibal as he joined the attack of the dogs, regaining his feet and pulling Randall back, throwing him. But the boy kept his feet and now turned his attention to his master.

“You did not see me.” Randall roared at Hannibal as he struck a blow across the man’s face, almost toppling him.

“I saw you, boy. I did not want you.” Hannibal countered, his blow aimed at Randall deflected by the bones, cracking them but not hurting the body beneath.

Will felt weak, still trying to regain breath and each one he took shuddered through his aching chest. He forced himself to remain conscious as he watched Hannibal and Randall trade blows - Randall’s armour was breaking apart but Hannibal was also taking punishing hits. Will struggled to sit and then to stand, he staggered towards the pair who were locked together, both trying to gain the upperhand.

As he approached, Hannibal cried out and grasped his wrist - a claw that Randall used as an extension of his own hand had torn down Hannibal’s arm, slicing his wrist open. Using the surprise this caused, Randall stepped forward and put his hands around Hannibal’s throat, beginning to choke the life from him.

“When she cursed you I thought you would finally notice me! When I told her what you had done, I could not have dreamed what the consequences might be - and how well they turned out. But you still did not notice me.” Randall squeezed his hands tighter with each word.

With a roar, Will forced himself forward. He knocked both Randall and Hannibal - now on his knees - to the ground. As Randall rolled away he jumped over and on top of him. The world went red as he brought his fists down, rained them down on Randall. Each blow found a target and Will did not immediately stop once he realised that the boy had stopped moving.

Panting, Will looked at his bloodied hands and then down at Randall. What had once been Randall. He slumped off the body, fell onto his back and lay there for a long while to catch his breath. The dogs came over, whimpering now that the commotion was over. Some licked at the blood on him, a brave one or two started to gnaw at Randall. Man-eaters, that was

something they would need to work on - though they would sort of fit right in. Will chuckled darkly to himself. He shooed them away from the man and they went as commanded.

It was only when Hannibal groaned that Will found the strength to ignore his own pain and struggle to his feet. He stumbled to his love and dropped down at his side, taking the sliced arm in his hands. Will ripped his own shirt and bound the wound as best he could and then looked for the horse.

It had moved to the undergrowth but was easily lead back. Will struggled to hoist the prone Hannibal up onto the horse's back, draping him over the saddle. Summoning his strength, he picked Winston up and settled him in his arms before leading the way back to the castle - horse and dogs in tow.

*

Hannibal woke in his bed, Will at his side, and wondered if it had all been a dream. The pain in his arm told him it was not. The wound was now properly cleaned and bound, he could feel from the pull in his skin that it had been stitched back together. Would that it might be so easy to stitch Will and himself back together. He was not sure he could be forgiven for what he might have done - how he might have killed Will. It all felt so much like a dream now, in the light of day. Had Will really seen him?

He looked down at his arm, raised it to see fur ending with a claw. The curse had not been lifted, and yet he had been so sure. So sure of Will’s assurances.

Will stirred next to him, a hand then lightly stroking up his arm and fingers lacing with his claws.

“Good morning.” Softly spoken and languid. The tender voice made Hannibal shiver. Will must have felt it for he then sat and rested himself over Hannibal, looking down at him with a smile. “You’re so beautiful.” The younger man breathed out the words as though truly captivated.

Hannibal frowned. “What do you see Will?”

“I see you.” He replied easily, leaning in and kissing Hannibal slowly. Hannibal was wary, too anxious to move lest he hurt his love. He gently pushed Will back and shook his head.

“I am still a beast…” Hannibal said, looking once more at his furred arms.

Will returned the frown and stroked a hand down Hannibal’s face. “I see you as a man.” His words more gentle than the last. “Here, your beard, greying.” He smiled. “Your lips… kissable.” He leaned in a kissed them again.

This time Hannibal returned the kiss, and as Will had said he did not feel a beast. It did not seem that he would cut Will with sharp teeth that yesterday he might have used to rip out his heart.

When they pulled apart, Hannibal felt he might lose himself in Will's loving gaze. "I don't understand… the curse…"

"Perhaps there is an illusion here, who knows with a curse."

"I am still a beast." Hannibal repeated, both dismayed and confused. He reached his clawed hand up to Will's face. It was only as their skin touched that he saw it, for a moment, then he looked harder and it had gone. But in that moment that their skin met skin he saw not his clawed hand, but a human hand that he had not seen for many years.

"I cannot pretend to understand how this curse might work, but I know it is changing. I'm changing…" The words came out in a soft growl, satisfied that no matter what he saw, Will could clearly see the man he was. It filled his heart.

-

There was a knock and the door opened. Abigail entered with apothecary supplies, drawing to Hannibal first to look at his wound. Clearly she had been the one that had cared for them and tended their wounds. So big a duty for so young a girl. She looked them both over now, inspecting each wound and replacing dressings where needed. As usual, she did not speak and yet Hannibal could read her expression, her almost completely hidden grin. Almost hidden. He said nothing about it, though his own lips tweaked slightly. She left again in as much silence.

Once she had gone, Hannibal studied Will, his ribs bound, the red marks around his neck. The marks that he had made in his rage. He raised a claw and ran it along the marks, Will tilting his head to let him, closing his eyes and sighing - making Hannibal's heart ache.

"I'm sorry Will. I can never hope to be forgiven… I thought you had left me."

"Never! Don't you know that?" Will caressed his face once more. "I left you a note - I needed to go and confront Verger… not that it did any good. He yet lives." He could see the disappointment in Will's face.

"There was no note…" Hannibal's trailed off realising it must have been another deception of Randall's. "Randall." He growled. "I will eat his heart, given that he would have willingly broken mine."

"I would join you." Will said, pressing their lips together once more.

*

"You see now. You see what he has done!". The townsfolk cringed as Mason spoke his words, as he pulled back the mask Cordell had fashioned, to reveal the bloodied face below. "The beast will come after your children, he'll make off with them in the night!" He enjoyed the shocked gasps. "We're not safe till his head is mounted on my wall! I say we kill the Beast!"

A cheer of agreement went up amongst the frightened people and even Mason was surprised at how quickly they took up torches and pitchforks. Will had been tracked as far as the beast's castle - no doubt where he had hidden these past months. He knew not if the townsfolk would assist in his pursuit of Will, but he knew their fear could be incited to move upon the beast.

The forest, in parts, came down around them - trees felled and fashioned into battering rams as they swept through like locusts. The gate was their first victim, falling easily to the ram and quickly crumbled under foot - what once read "Lecter" was no longer legible.

With angry chants, Mason led the people to the castle doors.

*

They sat eating breakfast that Abigail had made them and brought to the bed chamber, feeding each other small bites of freshly smoked meats. Hannibal was mesmerised by the small touches of Will's hands, that if he squinted, became human flesh for just a moment.

"You make me myself… I am completed by you." He told Will.

Will's smile was almost coy, and he did blush - the pinkness reaching his ears. And Hannibal understood that Will was unused to having such love and affection, even less used to accepting it. Which he did readily, along with Hannibal's gentle lips.

A sudden banging at the door brought them both back to the reality they had found themselves drifting from. Before either could respond, the door was flung open and Abigail rushed in - clearly terrified, her face pale. She ran to Hannibal and clutched at him for comfort before raising one hand and gesturing emphatically toward the window.

As Hannibal held tight to the trembling girl, Will went to the window. A low growl escaping from him.

"The townsfolk come to kill us." He said, noting them moving slowly from the gates that could just be seen from the Castle. It would be a short while before they would reach the castle itself, though not long enough. "This is my fault, I have brought them upon us." Will lamented.

Hannibal was not afraid and yet he felt a streak of fear run through him - not for himself, but for Abigail, for Will. He pulled the girl away from him. "It is me they will want." He thrust Abigail into Will's arms as he returned to the side of the bed. "Take Abigail, lock yourselves in the tower - it is the most secure part of the castle."

"I won't leave you." Will's words were tinged with pain.

"I know." Hannibal stood and stroked a claw down Will's cheek, watching again as it briefly glimmered to human and back again. "But I need you to protect Abigail. You are my family, I need you to be safe."

As Will went to protest again, Hannibal pulled him close, Abigail wedged between them as he hugged them both. He leaned in to whisper close to Will's ear - "I will be useless unless I

know that you are both safe."

Will pulled back and nodded. He hoisted the girl up into his arms, holding her tight as he left the room.

*

It had been so many months since Will had been in the tower - he had never returned once he had been released and so Abigail had to indicate the way to him. They ended in the room, the cell, where Will had first lived in the castle. He placed Abigail down and pulled himself as tall as possible to look through the barred window high in the wall. He could see again the people closer, minutes away now.

He left the cell and walked the corridor, looking for anything that might help them. He found a few chairs along the corridor, and a torch in one of the other cells. He pulled a chair with him back to the cell, along with the torch. He lit the torch with matches from his pocket and placed it in the sconce on the wall. He set the chair by the door.

Will crouched down next to Abigail and held her by the shoulders, looking into her scared face. "I need to help Hannibal." He told her. Her face eased a little, and she nodded her understanding. He knew that if she were bigger, less gripped by fear, then she would do the same. "Once I am gone place the chair at the door to wedge it closed, do not open it for anyone. If you must, use the torch to defend yourself." He sighed and pulled her into a hug. "This is just precaution. I won't let anyone up here, you will be safe."

She gave the slightest of smiles and nodded. He squeezed her again before striding from the room.

*

Hannibal was in the grand foyer. He watched as with each loud bang, with each ram against the heavy wooden doors, they buckled inwards ever so slightly more until they finally gave way. And there stood the townsfolk, suddenly bewildered to find themselves facing the beast at the entrance to his home. Their hesitation only lasted a moment before a roar went up amongst them and they stormed into the foyer.

Hannibal stood at the centre of them, he opened his arms to them, which they gratefully grabbed, bound, pulled him down. He felt no shame in this end. It was the only way he could ensure that Will and Abigail - that his family - was safe. Once he was brought low there would be no need to search the castle or pursue others, he was sure of that. His blood would be enough to sate them - they would not kill a man and girl, as surely as they would kill a beast.

"Hold him!" It was the voice of Mason Verger, he was brought through the crowd on a sedan and placed in front of the cowed beast. "Do not kill him yet."

The crowd hushed as Mason stood and walked to the beast. Hannibal turned his eyes up to the man as he took ahold of one of his antlers and pushed his head lower still.

“So, I could not make him love me, but I discover his trail back to this place. He would rather be here with a beast than with me.” There was an equal measure of venom and hysteria in the words. “Where is he? Where is the beautiful William Graham? I say beauty…” the man huffed with amusement. “He will not be so beautiful once I have him, once I repay this.” He pulled off the mask.

A few in the crowd gasped, those that had not been as close when assembled in the town and now saw the horror of Verger’s face. Amongst all was a general murmur of confusion. Was this all still about Will Graham? Hannibal could see it on their faces. For sure they wished him dead, scared of his form and true self, but they had perhaps not realised that there was more to Verger’s intentions than they had been lead to believe. In fact, towards the edges a few peeled off, quietly leaving and moving away from the castle - their bloodlust having waned.

Hannibal said nothing. He would not give up Will no matter how he might be tortured.

“I am here Mason.” Will’s voice rang out from the top of the grand staircase, booming around the foyer and lodging a shard of fearful ice through Hannibal’s heart.

“Apprehend him!” Verger shouted to no one in particular and as a result it took them a moment to react. By the time a few of the townsfolk broke away to take after him, Will was gone - along the landing and out of sight. Heading away from the tower.

*

Will’s heart raced as he ran, in part the exertion and in part the fear that this might not work. He had only had minutes to collect items from his chambers and set them up - items he had been working on as a hobby that he had never dreamed to use in this way.

For Abigail, wheels to affix to her boots so that she could skate as though on ice - these took out two men who stood on them at the top of the grand staircase and spilled back down.

For Hannibal, a mechanism by which to light his candles from a distance - a switch that he had now rigged instead to light a torch from the cells that he had dipped heavy in fuel. Now triggered by him as the pursuers reached the torch - it flashing into life with such intensity that the flames leapt to several of them. All ran, the flames easily patted out but the fear not repressed.

The final pursuers stood now with caution. Will moved back towards them so they might see him, goaded them with words and laughter until they finally made up their minds and took after him. Running along the corridor to the last - a crude thing - the last of Will’s arsenal. The first of them ran into the fishing wire that Will had pulled taut across the hall at throat height. It was not enough to kill the man, but enough to stun and leave a mark, enough to put fear into him for retreat. And retreat he did with his companions. As they raced down the grand staircase into the foyer they spooked the remaining crowd.

“Witchcraft”, “Unholy magic”, “turn back and repent.” Shouts to the crowd, enough to drive them off, retreating back out of the castle with as much energy as they arrived. Only leaving Mason Verger stood over Hannibal who was brought to his knees.

*

“I will not have this!” Mason cried as he rounded on Hannibal. “You will not have him, monster.”

“He’s no monster Mason, you are!” Will’s voice was a salve to him as he then saw his love emerge at the top of the staircase unharmed.

“Will.” Hannibal breathed the name with relief, ignoring Mason’s glance at him, the flash of disgust there. He turned his face fully to Will now that he could see him, watched as he started down the stairs two at a time. Not seeing Mason raise his hunting gun from the sedan. He felt the bite at the same time he heard the boom of the gunshot. He felt the warmth a moment later and heard Will’s cry.

Hannibal looked down to see blood spreading from his side as he dropped to the ground.

*

Will cried out and drew up the hunting knife he had armed himself with. Anger, fear as well at the thought of losing Hannibal, made him careless and unrefined. Mason was able to easily evade him as he reached the foyer, Will stumbling the last few steps - torn between attacking Verger and going to Hannibal. He went with his heart and dropped to Hannibal’s side.

“No, Will… go, please…” Hannibal tried to push him away, his anguish obvious.

They both freeze as they hear the rifle reloaded behind them.

“I love you, Will.” Hannibal breathed the words out. Will pulled Hannibal’s hands up to his lips and kissed them, tears stinging his eyes as Hannibal’s slowly closed.

With a roar Will turned and lunged at Verger, the gun going off but wide as Will pushed it away. It clattered loudly to the floor - all noise disturbingly amplified and echoed around the grand foyer. Their grunts and cries bouncing off the walls as Will wrestled Mason to the ground, until he finally was atop the man, looking down at his uncovered and ruined face - truly a reflection of the man within.

Will wasn’t sure when he had dropped the knife, but it must have landed nearby for it was quickly in Mason’s hand - then in Will’s shoulder. He cried with pain and pulled it out, blood gushing with it. Though woozy, he managed to keep Mason pinned.

He batted at Will with his arms, flailing wildly in an attempt to have any blow land, but Will deflected them easily. After what seemed an age of squabbling, Will managed to pin Mason’s arms down, and with a cry of rage, he leaned in and clamped his teeth -pulling back and ripping with it Mason’s throat.

Panting, blood running from his shoulder, from his hands, from his mouth - Will finally slumped forward and let the darkness take him.

*

The two skulls, expertly defleshed and now boiled white, sat in the centre of the table. The centre of an arrangement of dark pink and red roses, blackened twigs, dark feathers that appeared black but in the right light were green and purple.

Will marvelled at the centrepiece, so beautifully put together by Hannibal, something so fitting for the meal before them. He and Hannibal both, had doned fine suits for the occasion, Abigail was dressed in a pretty gown. Hannibal had looked lovingly at her when she arrived in the dining room - Will knew that he felt even more her father now that they were there together. More clearly a family of which she was part of, rather than master and ward. Will had helped her chose the dress from a wardrobe that Hannibal had told him of, in a room that felt more like a mausoleum, the door marked with an ornate letter "M". Abigail seemed to give the room reverence, telling of its significance - she had hesitated over the dresses until Will had encouraged her.

As they sat watching her now take her seat Will looked at Hannibal. Hannibal sat at the head of the table, meat in front of him ready to carve - choice cuts of both Randall and Verger, both smelling divine as they never had in life. This was too much of an honour for them, Will thought, to be made into something so beautiful, but that was Hannibal's way. Will had a seat on one side of the table, Abigail opposite him, her feet not quite reaching the floor as she swung them back and forth. A neat family indeed, one well earned and well kept. One currently bandaged and sore, but alive and together. Hannibal still a man to him, but a beast to himself - alive and cursed, though the nature of the curse seemed to never be clear to them.

Will watched as Abigail took care to flatten the collar of her dress, the same reverence there as she had shown in the room. She evidently knew more about the room's previous occupant than Will did.

"Another girl once lived in this castle?" Will asked. He noticed Hannibal pause for less than a moment, before he continued to sharpen the carving knife and nodded.

"My sister, Mischa. She was killed during the war." Despite how calmly he spoke, Will could feel the emotional strain behind Hannibal's words. "Now is not the time to speak of it… of her…" Death, Will knew he was going to say.

Will smiled gently. "No, not of the war. Tell me about her, was she as beautiful as our Abigail?" Will turned the smile to Abigail who beamed back at him, pleased with the compliment.

"Oh, equally so, they might have been sisters in their loveliness." Hannibal's words will filled with kindness and love as he looked at the girl who would be his daughter.

They both laughed lightly as Abigail blushed.

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Abigail watched Hannibal carve the meat, her mouth watering though she knew she was not allowed any. Instead Will had made her a meal of a chicken, which did not smell quite as succulent. Abigail was used to it as Hannibal had never allowed her to eat his special meats, and even so she found herself happy that he wanted Will to eat it.

She hoped that Will would not leave again. She noticed how they touched now, holding hands and sometimes kissing a cheek when they thought she wasn't watching. It made her happy to see Hannibal happy as she had never seen him before. It lifted something within her, allowed her to be happier than she had been - to put to rest the horror of her memories.

Hannibal carved and placed the meat on his and Will's plates, before raising a glass and encouraging them to do the same - she with juice rather than wine as them.

"Let us eat of our enemies. Randall and Verger were perhaps men misunderstood, unseen as we are seen. They met a fitting end both." Hannibal smiled, all cheer.

Abigail swallowed hard, feeling the need to say something. She had felt this need so many times and yet her mind had kept her mouth closed. But now, this seemed like a beginning, a happy beginning and a future in which she wanted a voice.

Rusty with disuse, her voice croaked "beasts" directed to the meat as she watched Hannibal carve the men that might have destroyed this happy family. Both men looked at her, delighted smiles, loving eyes. Her heart swelled and she sipped her juice with a blush, watching her two fathers. Will was still smiling as he took a fork of flesh into his mouth, closed his eyes with pleasure.

Hannibal seemed suddenly lost - he was looking to his own fork instead, to the hand that held it. He seemed mesmerised, delighted. He put down his fork and stared at his hand, grinning, before bringing the hand to his face and feeling there with a grin.

"Will, I… I see!" Hannibal's voice was filled with emotion. Abigail frowned, unsure what had happened.

She looked back to Will for answers. The change came upon him so suddenly and neither man seemed to notice, to see what Abigail was seeing. To Abigail, Will had slowly sprouted antlers, small at first but now imposing as each minute passed. Had he always looked so like Hannibal? Had he always been covered in so much fur? Had his feet always been cloven? It felt like he had already been this way, and yet she knew that was not the case. But it was his true self, that she was certain of.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks everyone for your comments and kudos - they are greatly appreciated!

I have taken elements for this fic (including some dialogue) from Disney's Beauty and the Beast, NBC's Hannibal and the Harris novels (primarily Hannibal and Hannibal Rising), though I've played around with them a bit (mute Abigail instead of mute Hannibal etc - in the book the first word Hannibal says when he talks again is call someone "beast" so I HAD to use it here!). I hope it all works together - it was weirdly easier than I thought to fuse hannigram and Disney together, lol!

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